TRANSFORMED

February 9, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Serivce

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"There was a marriage at Cana in Galilee...Jesus also was invited."
--John 2:1-2 (RSV)

Scripture
Psalm 121
Isaiah 62:1-5
John 2:1-11

"He had no money, held no office, receive no honors, had no retinue, was not backed by any party or authorized by any tradition. How could a man without power claim such authority? Was not his situation hopeless from the very beginning? But while his teaching and his whole conduct exposed him to fatal attacks, he was also offered spontaneously trust and love. In a word, he represented for many a parting of the ways." [Hans Kung, On Being a Christian, p. 278]

That lucid paragraph is the way Professor Hans Kung introduces Jesus of Nazareth in his monumental work, On Being a Christian. Kung wrote that book for Christians and non-Christians who ask a very elemental question: "What difference does it make? Does it matter, really matter, whether or not I claim to be Christian? Will it change anything?" Kung suspected, accurately as it turned out, that there are a lot of people asking that question, both in and out of the church, Christians and non-Christians, people who, in his words, "believe, but feel insecure in their faith, who do not believe but nevertheless seriously inquire,...people who are skeptical, both about their convictions and about their doubts." [p. 19]

Jesus meant a "parting of the ways" for the people he encountered. Things were different, people were transformed. Professor Kung's scholarly work reminds us that what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about is change, transformation. What Christianity is about institutionally is transformation - social transformation. God sent his son to save the world - which in the Biblical idiom does not mean in some life other than this one, but to transform, change, save this world, here and now. The Bible is not modest about the agenda. The purpose of the enterprise is to redeem the whole creation, to make things right, to heal brokenness, to make a difference. The agenda of the church, on the other hand, pales by comparison. It would appear to be to work so hard that every living human being goes to church and sings the same hymns. In the Bible, however, the purpose is to transform people and to change the world.

It is not possible to read very far in the New Testament without encountering a reminder of those purposes. The lesson this morning, for

instance: the story which introduces the public life and ministry of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.

"There was a marriage at Cana in Galilee...Jesus was also invited."

What in the world was Jesus doing at that wedding in Cana? What does it mean that he changed water into wine at that wedding? The wedding was no ten minute ritual followed by a two hour reception. It was a seven day celebration. It started with a noisy parade. The friends of the groom went to the bride's house and noisly, happily, escorted her to his house for the wedding supper. Then began a week-long period of partying. In our day a wedding is often preceded by a week or a season of merrymaking which - I have often thought is designed to be a kind of ultimate test of the couple's love and patience, and the physical endurance of their parents - culminates in the ceremony after which everyone, thoroughly exhausted, collapses and the bride and groom disappear as discretely and quickly as possible. In Jesus' day, the parties followed the wedding and lasted for a week.

There is an ancient tradition that Jesus' mother was related to the groom, but that is just speculation. They were certainly friends. When they arrived in Cana, Jesus, his mother, and some of their friends, the supply of wine for the festivities suddenly and unexpectedly ran out. Scholars suggest that Jesus and friends either came late in the week, or - because of their poverty - neglected to follow the near Eastern custom of bringing wine to add to the common supply for the celebration. Whatever the reason the wine was gone. And if contemporary and personal experience is a teacher I would submit that the situation was very unhappy. The groom was furious, his mother was frantic, his father was embarrassed - they were probably arguing, accusing each other of miscalculating, "I told you to order more wine...How could I know his friends would drink so much...?" and the bride was in tears. This is the stuff of real human tragedy. Mary, meanwhile, knew them all well and loved them enough to feel their pain and embarrassment, silly but terriby real for them, as only a very good friend can.

She called the situation to Jesus' attention and he made a peculiar request. There were six large stone jars near the entrance: they were part of the foyer furniture in most homes. They held the water for various rites of purification practiced in a Jewish household. Several times a day people washed their hands. When guests arrived they washed. The jars held twenty to thirty gallons of water.

Jesus took the servants aside and told them to fill those jars to the top. The professional host - the caterer as it were - was summoned. When he tasted the contents he discovered very good wine. And now there is an inside joke in the text...the wine is so good that he chided his employer for not serving it first. The obvious inference is that after several days of party no one noticed the difference if the quality of the wine changes. And so the party continues now with Jesus and friends in attendance, and with 120 gallons of good wine to keep it going.

What does it mean? The author of the Fourth Gospel has included several stories that are not found elsewhere... They are different - unique. He calls them "signs." The fact that changing water into wine is improbable, unlikely, impossible on the basis of anyone's understanding of chemistry, seems not to concern him at all. "The author," Catholic scholar Ramond Brown observes, "mentions the miracle almost as an aside."

Signs point elsewhere. It is the essence of a sign not to call attention to itself but to direct attention to some other subject. If a sign receives too much attention it begins to violate its own purpose, as anyone discovers, for instance, who drives into the city for the first time and is so busy collecting, comparing, and computing the information on the signs on the freeway, that he or she ends up on the way to Wisconsin instead of on Michigan Avenue.

We'd like to know how it is that water becomes wine, and that question, which is a product of the scientific method and our objective approach to the world, serves us very well except here, because the author neither knows nor seems to care. The text doesn't ask the question and it will not yield an answer. It is a sign pointing not to better life through chemistry, nor how much wine to order for a wedding reception, but to Jesus.

It points to the fact that things get transformed when he is around. Christian people need that reminder, because it is part of our humanity, frankly, not to want to change. It is human to assume that while others clearly need to expand their horizons, grow, change, and become new people, the status quo in our lives is actually quite acceptable the way it is. I was reading an essay last week on the way institutions function. The author proposed that the purpose of standing committees in most organizations is to provide stability by resisting new ideas and change. That's true about people, I submit. In the structure of our personalities we have a group of standing committees the purpose of which is to tell us that things are all right, the status quo is just fine, to define the good and the hopeful and the possible on the limited basis of what we already are; to resist, that is to say, personal change. Nobody wants to change. We become experts at justifying who we are and devising reasons why we should not and cannot change.

Liberal Protestantism, someone noted, has simply abandoned the whole idea of transformation of people. The word itself has become offensive - conversion. We have found the soul-shattering, emotional upheavals identified with conversion so distasteful we keep the whole idea at arm's length. We are skeptical, rightly so - of instant anything: instant gratification, instant potatoes, instant salvation. We are mature enough to have experienced in our own lives the fact that profound change is a process, not an event. Our distaste for the hellfire and brimstone tirades of televison evangelists, however, has caused us simply to avoid the very concept, and the personal possibility of transformation.

The cultural pressure is for religion to baptize the status quo. It has always been so. It is simply normative for the state to look to its

religious institutions to provide stability. When those institutions stop providing stability: when they are seen to be the place where questions about status quo are asked and start agitating for change, the state feels betrayed..."after all - what is religion for?"... and sometimes becomes angry, and sometimes shuts those instituions down and creates new ones which understand that their function is to baptize the status quo. The same dynamic operates on a personal basis. Very few of us, I would guess, came here this morning wanting to be told that we need to change. In fact, all week long we've been pushed and pulled, prodded and jogged, rushed and hurried and harrassed and what we really need is for someone to tell us that everything will be all right, that we'll make it, that we will cope. None of us is without that need. Each of us needs a reminder that the God who made us loves us and gives us the resources to live life fully and faithfully. But in the process of meeting that need religion sometimes accommodates so easily and becomes simply one more support system, one more self improvement scheme to help us lose weight, shape up, have better relationships, become our own best friend, and above all else - to be happy. William Willimon of Duke University wrote: "We have psychologized the Gospel, turned it into a feeling, transformed the Kingdom of God into a mood. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that the Messiah we await is the great cosmic affirmer of all we hold dear." [C. C., 12/8/82]

Jesus changed things. The unique attraction he had to those people who became his disciples - is that they were changed. They became something new and bigger and better - in the process of following him. To be a Christian is to be transformed, sometimes instantly, more often gradually, gently, as imperciptably as the growing of a child. To follow Jesus is to change the way we spend money, the way we establish personal priorities, the way we teach values, the way we cast ballots. To follow Jesus is to change from behaving, spending, voting on the basis of simple self interest. That's our natural inclination: self interest, self protection, I want mine first...to the basis of his will, his values, his priorities. It is to change from concern for my welfare to others.

The power of our religion is best seen not in Cathedrals or wealth but in the changes it has already affected in the human story. It was Christianity that introduced the idea of orphanages to Rome and clamored for the end of gladiatorial murder as public entertainment. Hospitals were a Christian invention. Educational institutions in the new world were begun, almost without exception, by Christian people. We have changed human history.

It's a poor analogy, but the most important people in our personal histories are those who forced us to change. Think of them...the ones who insisted on seeing more in us than we were willing to see; the teacher, the coach, the parent, the friend, who loved us enough to want us to grow. That is the essence of the Gospel. That is what Jesus is about, and it is the first reality to which the sign of Cana points.

The second is that party, that wonderful seven-day-cycle-of-creation-festival-of-life. This sign points to the fact that Jesus the Christ was comfortable at that celebration: that he loved being with his friends,

sharing a high and human moment of joy. Madeleine L'Engle, in an essay on love, marriage and human sexuality writes: "Too many people would like to forget that Jesus' first miracle was turning water to wine at a marriage feast, in a glorious affirmation of human love, human joy, human pain." [The Irrational Season, p. 41]

John the Baptist, to whom some of Jesus' disciples were attracted, would not have been caught dead at that wedding celebration. Nor would some of the more vocally zealous Christians I know. One hundred and twenty gallons of wine would have them heading for the exits. At the beginning of the story, however, there is a sign that points to the fact that you don't have to be religious to follow Jesus if religion continues to mean other-worldly, long-faced, life-denying, grim-piety. Or - perhaps it's better to say that this sign points to a wonderful reality; namely, that to follow Jesus is to love this world, not to deny it, avoid it, be delivered from it, hate it - but to love it - wholly, utterly.

It is a word the world needs to hear. And it is a word the church in every age has needed to hear itself. We have flirted for twenty centuries with a Greek idea that matter is inferior: that the created order - the tangible world of senses, feelings, tastes, appetites, sounds, colors, is essentially evil, to be distrusted, avoided, escaped. And that the world of the spirit, the soul, the realm of ideas is holy and good. Under the influence of Greek metaphysics, from the end of the first century until the present, the Christian Church has never seemed to be certain that it believed God knew what he was doing when he created human beings with bodies - and appetites, and senses, instead of allowing them to float around as inanimate spirits. From its commitment to clerical celibacy, to its insistence that the primary and therefore only authentic function of sexuality is to make babies, to its aversion to and obstruction of honest sex education for young people who at the moment are reproducing our cities into a major sociological crisis, much of Christianity seems to believe that human sexuality is at best a cosmic mistake and at least, a necessary evil.

Danish Theologian Soren Kierkegaard remarked somewhere that while Jesus turned water into wine, his church seems determined to turn wine back into water. Recently contemporary Puritanism has been defined as discomfort at the possibility that someone, somewhere, is having a good time.

The sign of Cana, Jesus at the wedding, points back to that magnificent affirmation in the first book of the Bible: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." [Genesis 1:31] Christianity, this sign suggests, is not a denial of this world, but an affirmation of it. To be a Christian, this sign suggests, is to love the world, as Jesus so dearly did.

The sign of Cana points, not to those stone jars, finally, but to one who, incredibly, got involved in a mundane human situation, helping along a wedding celebration about to end prematurely for a lack of refreshments. It points to one who can take the forms, the rituals - not only of

religion, but the stable, old rituals by which we live, or on the basis of which we refuse to live, and infuse them with newness, energy, zest, love.

The sign points to the incarnation which is and always has been the real miracle. The person of Jesus as God among us, in the flesh, is the miracle here... The Holy God, High King of heaven, come among us as one who cares about things like a wedding celebration, the birth of a child, the graduation of a sone, the ordination of a daughter, the death of a parent. The miracle here is a God who cares about humanness. A God of the whole creation who wants peace - in the Middle East and Northern Ireland, but also between you and your neighbor, or you and your children: a God who finds world hunger intolerable but who also suffers personally with each hungry, homeless person who will materialize at the door of this church tomorrow. The miracle here is a God who embraces our humanness: our guilt, our anxiety, our fear of dying and fear of living. The sign of Cana is a God who so loves us that he gets involved in our lives where they are most trivial, embarrassingly and irritatingly human. Incarnation... Jesus of Nazareth - Jesus the Christ - the Miracle.

Writing about history and the impact individuals have on it, an essayist observed: "The only kind of change in life which means anything because it transforms everything in its path, is that which changes people's thinking, their deepest convictions, that which makes them see the world in a different way. This doesn't happen often." [See Alfred Kazin, in Robert Raines, New Life in the Church, p. 22]

To believe is to be transformed. It is not simply moral improvement, although that is the result. It is not to be this or that politically. It is not simply to alter life styles, although that will surely happen.

It is to turn one's whole being to Jesus Christ.

It is to love the world as deeply and profoundly and strongly as we are able.

It is to follow - to accept his Lordship, to be guided by his will.

And in turning to him and following after him it is to be transformed.

"There was a marriage at Cana in Galilee... Jesus was invited." He was there at that affirmation of human life. He turned water into wine...

The metaphor translates into a promise - Good News: Life can be tasteless, colorless, loveless, life can become the empty rituals of dailiness, carrying on, boring, deadly.

The promise is that Jesus Christ transforms water into wine - that in him there is beauty, delight, fullness, zest and once again, love...which is always new. Amen.